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When Beautification Sacrifices Identity and Legibility

A Critique of Contemporary Urban Beautification Approaches in the City of Tehran

Mohammadreza Mehrabani Golzar

Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran.

Abstract

Urban visual quality can be enhanced through artistic interventions in the urban environment, serving as a fundamental strategy to prevent the disconnection between aesthetics and the physical fabric of the city. Urban beautification should not be regarded merely as decoration; rather, it functions as a comprehensive and overarching concept embedded within all physical interventions in the urban environment. However, reducing the concept of beautification to context free visual embellishments, without consideration of the spirit of place and local identity, generates significant challenges in citizens' perception and understanding of the city.

This study adopts a critical approach and, through field observation, evaluates the initiatives undertaken over the past two decades by the Tehran Municipality's Beautification Organization, particularly in two domains: "façade calming and organization" and "nighttime lighting." These interventions are assessed based on two widely recognized theoretical frameworks in the urban design literature: Kevin Lynch's theory of urban legibility and Bentley's principles of responsive environments.

According to these criteria, homogenizing interventions in commercial signage, through the removal of semiotic codes, have undermined functional legibility, while lighting schemes that are inconsistent with the character and dignity of place have produced visual disturbance in citizens' aesthetic experience rather than reinforcing the spirit of place. The findings indicate that such prescriptive and homogenizing interventions in shop signage, along with lighting designs incongruent with the character of their settings, although intended to enhance visual appeal, have ultimately reduced environmental legibility and weakened the functional identity of urban spaces.

Furthermore, urban spaces that appear visually ordered yet lack meaning and identity have proven ineffective in fostering a sense of belonging. The prevailing rigid approaches have also diminished opportunities for citizen participation. Consequently, a transition from superficial beautification toward a meaningful and context sensitive approach to urban beautification emerges as an unavoidable necessity for urban management in Tehran.

Keywords: Urban beautification, aesthetics, identity, legibility, sense of belonging

Email: mehrabani777@yahoo.com

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The fundamental question is whether beautification interventions in Tehran have succeeded in creating spaces endowed with identity and legibility, or whether they have merely resulted in superficial scenography detached from their context?

Extended Abstract

In recent decades, rapid urbanization and the predominance of quantitative development over qualitative considerations have posed significant challenges for urban management. Within this context, environmental quality has emerged as a central concern in contemporary urban design and landscape discourse. Urban beautification programs- often implemented through public art, environmental graphics, façade treatments, and lighting strategies -are commonly employed to enhance the visual character of cities and improve citizens' experiences of urban space. However, evidence from Tehran suggests that an excessive emphasis on formal aesthetics, while neglecting perceptual, cultural, and semantic dimensions of place, has not necessarily improved environmental quality and in some cases has contributed to confusion in citizens' mental images of the city and a decline in spatial legibility.

This study critically investigates the gap between physical beautification and environmental meaning in Tehran's urban landscape. Using a qualitative research approach based on field observation, the paper evaluates selected beautification interventions implemented by the Tehran Municipality's Beautification Organization over the past two decades. Particular attention is given to two major domains of intervention: the homogenization and regulation of commercial signage within façade improvement projects, and the use of architectural and urban lighting in prominent public spaces.

The evaluation is conducted through the lens of two influential theoretical frameworks in urban design: Kevin Lynch's theory of urban legibility and Bentley et al.'s principles of responsive environments, particularly the concepts of legibility and perceptual richness. The findings indicate that many beautification initiatives in Tehran follow a predominantly visual, inflexible, and top down approach that may be characterized as prescriptive beautification. In the case of commercial signage, excessive standardization of form, color, and typography has removed important semiotic cues that contribute to orientation and functional recognition, thereby weakening the legibility of the urban environment. Similarly, certain contemporary lighting projects- such as those along Valiasr Street and within the Abbas Abad cultural district- have introduced highly saturated colors and dynamic lighting effects that obscure rather than reinforce the ecological and cultural identity of these spaces.

The study concludes that beautification strategies focused primarily on superficial visual order risk eroding place identity and diminishing citizens' sense of belonging. Effective urban landscape interventions should prioritize contextual meaning, cultural specificity, and sensory richness rather than formal uniformity. Consequently, adopting theory informed evaluation frameworks and participatory design approaches is essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable urban beautification.

Urban beautification in Tehran has largely followed an approach that is purely visual, inflexible, and top down. This dominant paradigm, aptly characterized as a form of prescriptive beautification, adopts a reductionist and one dimensional stance that disregards cultural pluralism and the city's multiple layers of meaning. Within this process, the urban management system, whether deliberately or inadvertently, excludes social participation and overlooks citizens' agency in shaping their living environment, instead seeking to impose a rigid geometric and mechanical order upon the city's living fabric and dynamic urban organism.

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